

THE ALDEN HOUSE  
AT DUXBURY, MASS.

By

Sylvester Baxter

THE only existing house that was the home of one of the Pilgrims of the Mayflower is the Alden homestead at Duxbury. As such it is the most important of the historic buildings of the Old Colony—the designation by which the land of the Pilgrims, the former colony of Plymouth (comprising the existing three Massachusetts counties of Plymouth, Bristol, Barnstable, and a small portion of Norfolk) is familiarly differentiated from the Colony of Massachusetts Bay. As an admirable specimen of dwelling-construction in the early colonial period, as well as for the interest attaching to its association with two of the most celebrated of the Mayflower's passengers, it will repay the visits to the second oldest of the Plymouth Colony towns which thousands of twentieth-century Pilgrims will make in this tercentennial period.

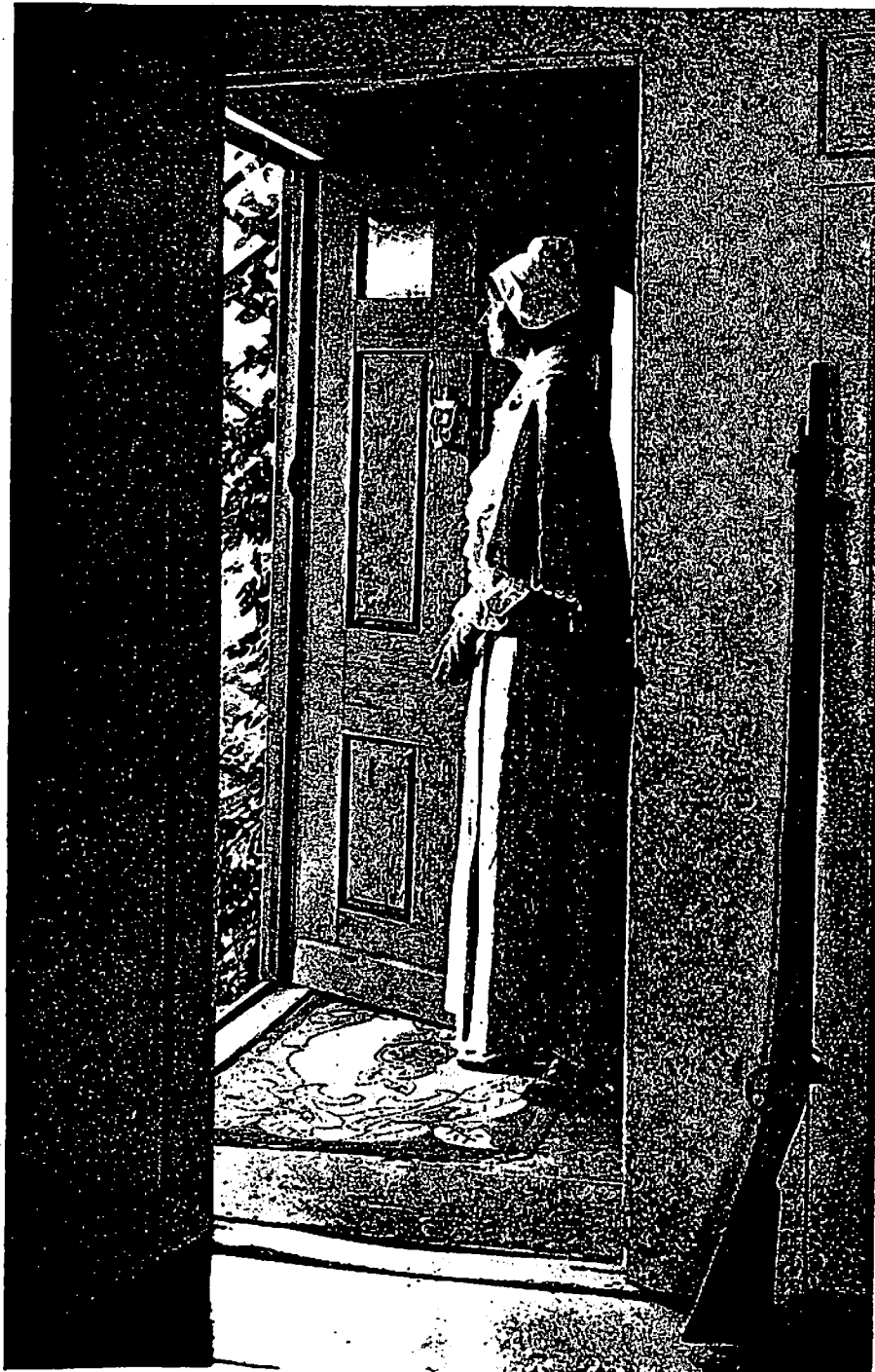
It is commonly called the "John Alden House." But this is not wholly correct. John Alden lived here, and so did his wife Priscilla, in their later years; he, and probably she, died here. But they lived with their son Jonathan, their oldest, who built the house in 1653. And most remarkably, from then till now, it has been owned by Aldens—handed down from father to son until it was bought by John T. Alden of St. Louis; from him it was purchased by Charles L. Alden of Boston, by whom it was recently transferred to its present owners, the Alden kindred of America.

All the Pilgrims, and their fellow colonists, the other forefathers, as they who came over to Plymouth in the first three ships were called, did not long remain in Plymouth. The will to migrate made itself felt at a very early day. Better lands, more room to spread out, soon attracted them to other places; the spirit of unrest that has steadily opened up the

whole continent and made the spirit of the Pilgrims the most potent force in our New World democracy. So it was that in 1627—only seven years after the landing and three years before Boston was founded—the Aldens left Plymouth to settle in Duxbury, near by, with seven others.

The house is typical of its class. With its sensibly plain exterior, its rectangular plan, its big central chimney, it reproduced in terms of wood the brick or stone house of the prosperous English yeoman or farmer. In its size, its look of dignity, its spacious rooms, its evidences of old-fashioned comfort, it tells of the conditions of affluence to which the leading members of the colony must have risen not many years after enduring the privations and struggles for existence that marked the start of their New World life. The Aldens, probably in common with the greater number of the forefathers in general, quite naturally took rank as the gentry of the colony, standing materially higher in the social scale than would have been their lot had they stayed at home; enjoying in their new environment, as they must have, the respect, deference, privileges and opportunities commonly accorded to first-comers in a newly settled land. The appearance of their home and its continued possession in the family speak of this quite convincingly. Other Alden homes, built in early days, tell a like story. In Little Compton, Rhode Island, whither one of the Aldens went to settle before the seventeenth century had passed, going with other families from the adjacent Plymouth Colony, the writer has had the pleasure of visiting a fascinating example of this fact.

The house, both without and within, probably looks today much as it did when built. Since shingled exteriors came af-



THE FRONT ENTRY, WITH MISS ANNIE BONNEY, OF SCITUATE, A MAYFLOWER DESCENDANT, DRESSED AS A PILGRIM MAIDEN—THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUNBURY, MASS.

ter those of clapboard in Colonial construction, probably the house was originally clapboarded. The present condition and aspect of the house are due to its last individual owner, who, acting in behalf of the Alden kindred, devoted himself to the task as a labor of love, giving it most painstaking attention. Mr. Alden says that he has not "restored" it in the common acceptance of the term, for there were no wornout elements to be reproduced. There has been no necessity for anything of the sort, for the house remained in extraordinarily good condition; like the usual run of old New England houses of its class and its day it was admirably built of substantial and lasting materials, and kept in repair by its owners from the beginning to this day. Hence depreciation has been slight. One of the best of expert examiners went through it thoroughly; he reported that he could not find the least evidence of decay or wearing out, saying he knew of no reason why it should not stand in good shape for at least 200 years to come.

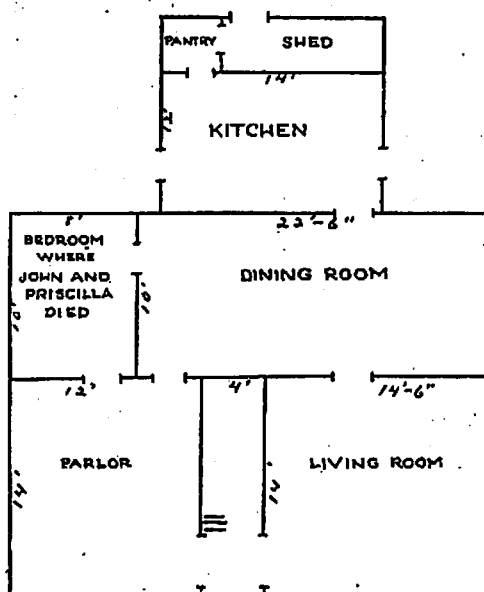
No attempt was made by Mr. Alden to make the house represent, in its interior, what it probably looked like in its first year. In wall-paper, furnishing, and various other things, it frankly shows itself in the fashion an old house would naturally assume under continual inhabitation by well-to-do persons, their standards of taste and comfort adapting themselves to their wants as the years passed; persons going out into the world and bringing back tokens of their travels in the shape of choice China, attractive furniture and the best sort of wall-paper of their day. So all that was needed to do to the house was to preserve the old-time aspect of things, make needful repairs, select appropriate wall-papers of suitably old-fashioned designs, and choose the sort of old furniture that characterized former days.

Mr. Alden had the fortune to obtain the help of an excellent carpenter trained in the traditions of the New England school that ruled when mechanics did first-class jobs because they took just pride in their work. This man added to the house only one feature that it did not

have as it stood. The pantry was too dark, so it was desirable to light it from the outside. So, just as Mr. Alden directed the change to be made—in such a way that nobody would suspect any alteration, using nothing new, whether board, shingle or nail—an old window of just the kind wanted was installed.

A striking token of the unsettled conditions of the young colony in the days when the house was built—wars with the Indians, dangers of invasion, witchcraft, and perhaps forebodings as to possible oppressions and persecutions of the sort that sent the Pilgrims across the Atlantic—lies in certain secret passages and hidden stairs whose existence would never be suspected. It doubtless seemed a wise precaution to provide opportunities for concealment and escape should an emergency arise.

When a place or a building is associated with notable happenings or distinguished personalities legends and myths are apt to arise. In Verona there is the house of Juliet; on Boston Common tourists are taken to see the bench where Howells' "Lemuel Barker" sat; perhaps by this time even the home of "Bromfield Corey" has been located. But

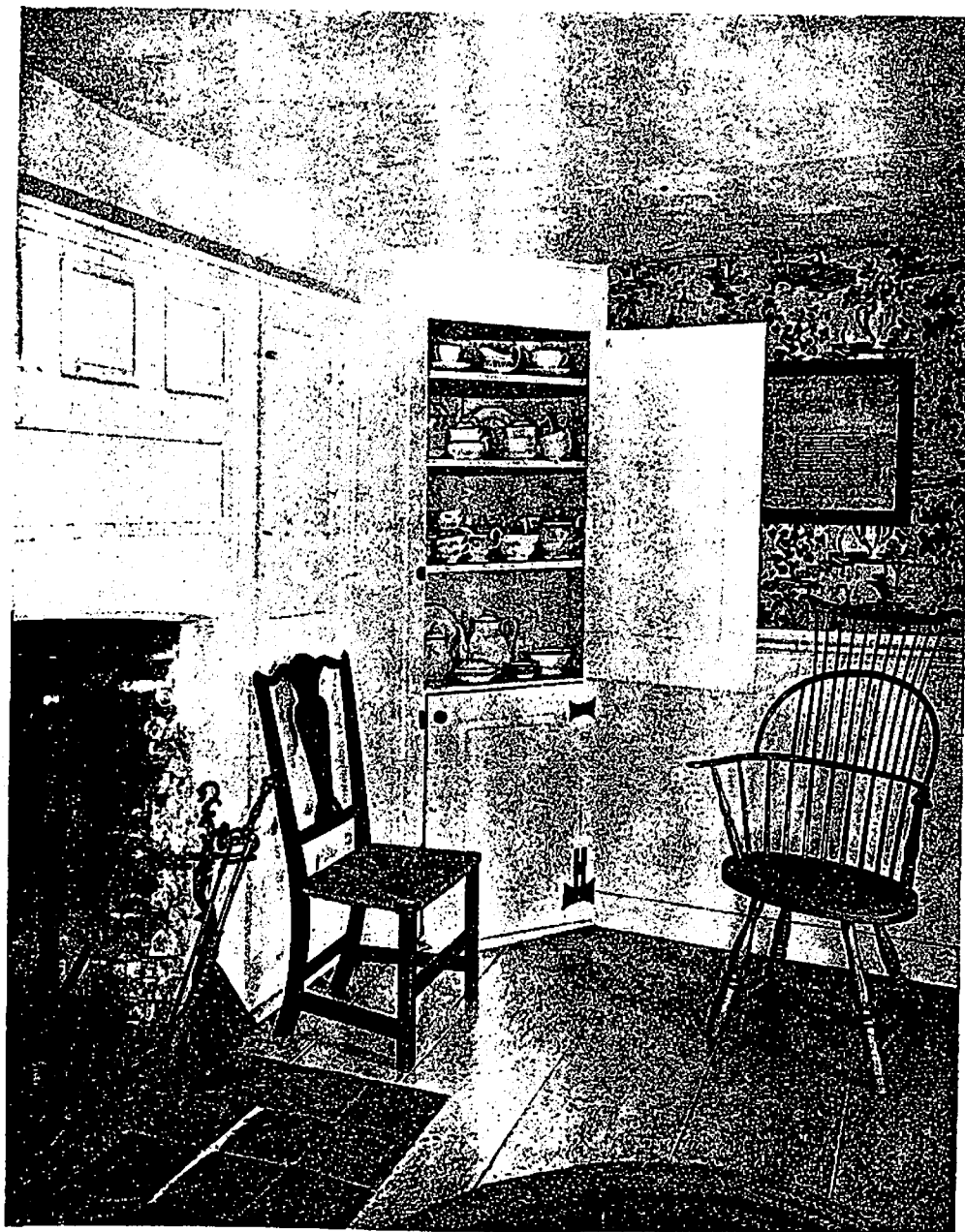


FIRST FLOOR PLAN—THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUXBURY, MASS.



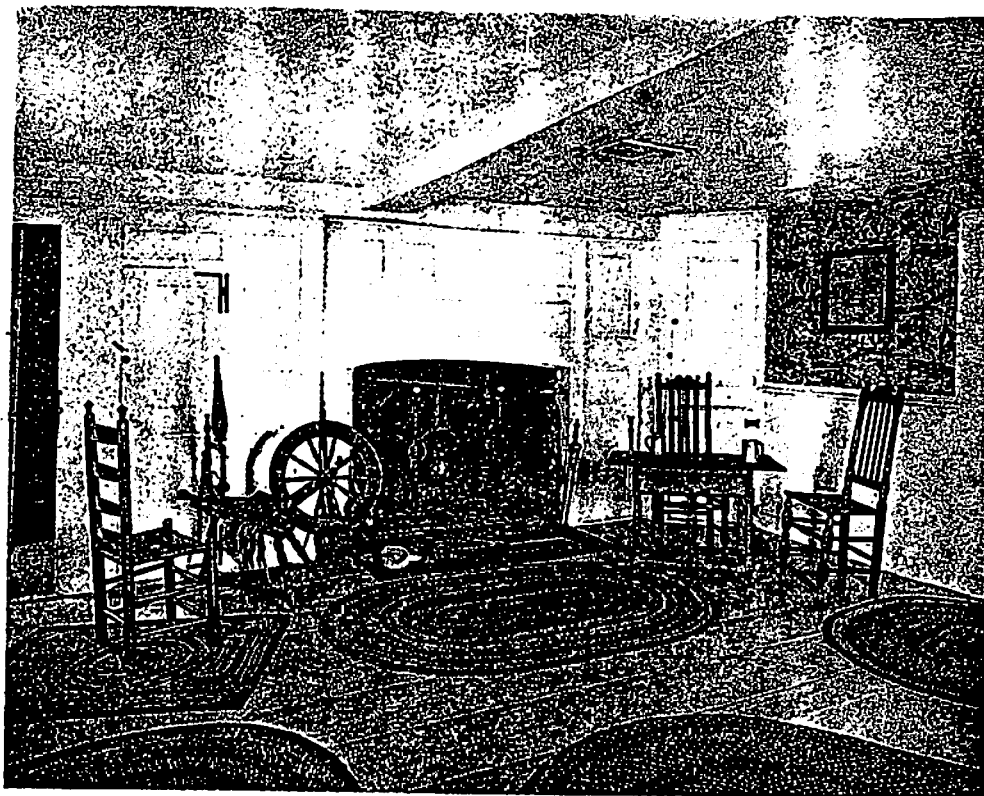
*Photos by Burr E. Church*

THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUXBURY, MASS.  
BUILT BY JONATHAN ALDEN IN 1653



CUPBOARD IN THE LIVING ROOM—  
THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUXBURY, MASS.





LIVING ROOM—THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUXBURY, MASS.

a better sanction exists for showing the small bedchamber opening out of the living-room as the scene of John Alden's death. The original home of John Alden and Priscilla in Duxbury stood on a knoll not far from the house of their oldest son, both houses standing on land sold to John Alden by Experience Mitchell, who as a forefather came on the *Anne*, one of the three first ships, including the *Mayflower*, and was an ancestor of the many Mitchells who lived and in numbers yet live in Plymouth Colony and thence spread over New England. Quite naturally, this small chamber, being on the ground floor and convenient to get about from, warmed from the living-room with its great open fire of blazing logs, would be just the place for an old man. There is also excellent testimony for this assumption: Mr. Charles L. Alden was told by an aged man, whose grandfather had told him, that the death of John Al-

den in 1687 took place in that room. There was a gap of only 29 years between John Alden's death and the birth of that man's grandfather. Hence the information may easily have come from a contemporary of John Alden who had first-hand knowledge of the fact.

Most attractive features of the house are the fittings and furniture, selected and installed with scrupulous care so as to enhance the old-time aspect of the rooms, so quiet and dignified in their excellent design, by expressing the well-being of a typical family of the upper middle class in the early days. These rooms illustrate in a notable degree the social history of the Pilgrims and their descendants, indicating the deserved prosperity that the colony soon rose to: comfortable living served by a plain domestic beauty conspicuously higher than what later periods had to show before modernity had entered upon its esthetic phases.



DINING ROOM—THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUXBURY, MASS.

The collection of old-time furniture that gives the various rooms their perfect aspect of colonial interiors is of uncommon quality. Both in character and arrangement this feature also is due to the man who brought the house into such prime condition. Mr. Alden has long been an enthusiastic collector of antiques; so, beside the fine examples owned by the Alden kindred and permanently installed in the house, there are representative loans from his own rich collection. That part of it now in the Alden house has been estimated to represent a value of at least fourteen thousand dollars.

In arranging the different rooms, the intention has been to give the effect of a home that from the first has been inhabited by successive generations of the same family. The characteristic furnishings of each room thus appear to represent the best of what a continuing family of well-to-do people have accumulated

in the course of the three and a half centuries during which they have lived there. Nowhere in these rooms is there any of the effect of what may be called the inanimate self-consciousness that belongs to things merely placed on show. There is nothing of the ostentatious in the effect produced; nothing of the superfluous or excessive. Many of these things belonged to different generations of the Aldens and are therefore of particular interest. But much the greater part simply represents the best craftsmanship known by the ten successive generations of the family that has always owned the house.

A remarkable thing about the Aldens of America is the fact that John Alden appears to have been the only man of his family name that ever crossed the ocean to settle in the New World. Hence the American Aldens are essentially a generic unit. The most competent authorities have declared that no person in America



PARLOR, WITH DOORWAY (AT THE LEFT) TO BEDROOM WHERE JOHN AND PRISCILLA ALDEN DIED, AND DOORWAY TO KITCHEN—THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUNBURY, MASS.





LARGE CHAMBER IN SECOND STORY—THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUXBURY, MASS.



ANOTHER VIEW OF LARGE CHAMBER IN SECOND STORY—THE ALDEN HOUSE, DUXBURY, MASS.

### THE ARCHITECTURAL RECORD.

who rightfully bears the name by virtue of paternity has yet been found who is not a direct descendant of John Alden. The same holds true of the Alden blood that flows along female lines. The family would, therefore, seem to be an appropriate subject for investigation by students of eugenics.

As to the personality of John Alden and that of Priscilla Mullins, who became his wife, little is actually known. The atmosphere of poetry with which Longfellow has surrounded them has set them apart from their fellow Pilgrims. Yet there is little to indicate that there was anything at all more romantic about John and Priscilla than about any others of the company beyond the circumstance that they were both youthful and became lovers in their new life as pioneers. The celebrated episodes that give color to their story appear to be apocryphal. John Alden was a young cooper when he joined the Mayflower company at Southampton, perhaps impelled by the adventurous spirit of youth. Possibly he found a lucrative field for his trade in the New World. So his fortune may have been built on barrels!

Ten Alden names stand in the latest edition of "Who's Who." Two are women, one of whom bears the name by marriage. Their callings are as follows: lawyers, two; one of them also a lecturer; university professor, one; geologist, one; educator, one; four are authors, journalists, editors. Then, also there are hundreds of Aldens who have achieved prominence in the business world.

The Alden most eminent in letters was the late Henry M. Alden, originally a Congregational minister; becoming the

editor of Harper's Magazine, he was the man who did the most to form its distinctive character. He was one of the greatest American magazine editors, peculiarly beloved among his contributors. He wrote two celebrated books, ethical and philosophical in nature: "God in His World" and "A Study of Death."

John Berry Alden of New York, editor, author and publisher, is another man of fine and generous nature, quietly helpful to others in various ways; the American pioneer in the publication of cheap editions of high-class works.

The late W. L. Alden (William Livingstone) was an author loved by boys because of his delightful adventure tales; he was also a journalist, prominent as an editorial writer for New York newspapers.

John Alden is another prominent journalist and writer of newspaper verse; his newspaper life dates back more than 40 years, spent on the editorial staff of the Brooklyn Eagle. He stands high as a "newspaper poet." During more than sixteen years he has written about 5,000 poems, appearing daily in the Eagle; their outlook upon the bright side of life harmonizes with the circumstance that their author founded, more than 24 years ago, the International Sunshine Society.

Raymond Macdonald Alden, professor at Leland Stanford, Jr., University is a poet, dramatist, and writer of short stories; he has also written able books on literary subjects.

This list by no means exhausts the subject, for the Alden name has long been numerous prominent in law, medicine and other professions.